Celebrating Women: From Mothers Day to International Women's Day

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Celebrating Women: from Mothers Day to International Women’s Day
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How do we celebrate women in a world in which male domination is the rule? Indeed, can we celebrate women when the category “woman” has exploded? This paper compares two different secular holidays: International Women’s Day (IWD) and Mother’s Day in its French and U.S. incarnations. While both holidays have tortuous histories, used and abused, I argue that the former can be, and has been (re)claimed by feminists around the world as a holiday with potential positive impact for women and feminism, whereas the latter is irremediably beyond redemption and antagonistic to women’s interests.

Holidays, eminently political creatures, are represented in the mainstream as timeless and politically neutral. Like humor, holidays as part of “cultural,” or family “traditions” are supposedly exempt from scrutiny. However this free pass works selectively. So, whereas critiques of Mother’s Day, indeed of most beloved imaginarily “traditional” holidays, are seen as in bad taste, many people respond to IWD by saying that a single day for women marginalizes us, leaving the other 364 for men. The political meaning of holidays, as well as their creation, popularity, and survival, shifts in relationship to many factors, ranging from social movement practices and campaigns to overt manipulation and hijacking by the powerful as well as other more subtle shifts in framing and zeitgeist. The histories of IWD and Mothers Day shows us numerous such processes and transformations.

The Origins of International Women’s Day
IWD was no doubt born in 1911 when hundreds of thousands of women around the world protested for workers rights, suffrage and peace. Despite historic tensions, the holiday brought together two powerful movements: the socialism with its labor and labor movements, with feminist and suffrage ideals. Socialists Clara Zetkin in particular and soon thereafter Alexandra Kollontai were important figures in the creation of the holiday, but equally important were American—the term is anachronistic here--socialist feminists.

Many European socialists discounted or denounced the massive suffrage movement as being “bourgeois”; yet they could not ignore the power of feminist demands; the Second International had created a Women’s Bureau in 1907, headed by Clara Zetkin, which passed a resolution calling for Socialists to fight for women’s suffrage, albeit in and with Socialist organizations, independently of the “bourgeois suffragists.”

In the US, where there were by this period considerable interconnections among the labor, feminist and socialist movements, Socialist Party women held a mass meeting on women’s suffrage in 1908. In 1909, US Socialists then declared the last Sunday in February to be a national women’s day which brought together working and middle class women around a broad spectrum of feminist concerns ranging from women’s work to suffrage. In 1910, Zetkin and other Socialist women introduced a resolution at the Second International Women's Conference at Copenhagen:
In agreement with the class-conscious, political and trade union organizations of the proletariat of their respective countries, the Socialist women of all countries will hold each year a Women's Day, whose foremost purpose it must be to aid the attainment of women's suffrage. This demand must be handled in conjunction with the entire women's question according to Socialist precepts. The Women's Day must have an international character and is to be prepared carefully.  

The International set the day for either March 18 or 19 to coincide with the German commemoration of the 1848 Revolution and the Paris Commune. The date was later moved to March 8th.

In the year following the resolution, many events did take place such as huge demonstrations, particularly in Germany and Austria—some 30,000 in Vienna alone. Kollontai commented, "Germany and Austria ... was one seething trembling sea of women. Meetings were organized everywhere ... in the small towns and even in the villages, halls were packed so full that they had to ask [male] workers to give up their places for women." And some men even had to stay home to take care of their children.

The Model: May Day

Despite the very different historical context and meanings, IWD was modeled after May Day, the holiday for the workers of the world... that is the entire world except for the United States. That the US “Labor Day” takes place, not in May, but on the first Monday in September is particularly ironic, since May Day began as a commemoration of a US event, the Chicago Haymarket massacre of 1886.

The 1880s had been a period of radical labor activism in particular to win an 8-hour working day and Chicago was a hotbed of labor and specifically anarcho-syndicalist activism. On May 1, 1886, there was a general strike for the eight-hour day. On May 3, the Chicago police fired into a demonstration, killed several people. The following day, the police descended upon a large anarchist rally. There, a bomb exploded killing one policeman. The identity of the bomber has never never uncovered, yet a witch-hunt led to death sentences for seven anarchists for having helped this unknown perpetrator. Haymarket became an international symbol, enshrined by the Second Socialist International, when in 1889, they adopted May 1st as a holiday for the workers of the world.

The United States workers’ day had a very different history. In the context of a nearly feudal company town, workers for the Pullman Company had been on strike for decent wages and working conditions with the support of Eugene Debs and the American Railroad Workers. President Grover Cleveland declared the strike a federal crime and sent troops who fired on the crowd, killing two. The union was disbanded and Debs imprisoned, setting back the cause of unions for decades. Days later, a pending bill came to Cleveland’s desk for a worker’s holiday in September, and with elections coming, he signed it into law, hence the US “Labor Day.”

May Day nevertheless remained the international worker’s day; if in the Soviet block, it later lost its radical content and became a State holiday and the occasion for a military parade, it has retained its vitality in many places around the world, including sometimes even in the US from the anti-Vietnam War protests to the recent massive demonstrations for immigrants’ rights.
IWD and the Russian Revolution

International Women’s Day took on particular significance in 1917, when in Petrograd, women led a demonstration from the factories and the breadlines, which led to the events that brought down the Czar four days later, and marked the beginning of the Russian Revolution. Although male Bolshevik leaders had opposed the demonstration and were astonished at its impact, they later “claimed paternity.” This was on February 23rd by the Gregorian calendar, which translates into March 8th in the West.

In the new Soviet Russia, in part thanks to Kollontai’s position, women gained equality in the law, easier divorce, job security, maternity leave and much more. Yet despite official dogma that Communism freed women, Kollontai insisted that women still needed “Working Women’s Day,” because “[t]he shackles of the family, of housework, of prostitution still weigh heavily on the working woman.”

In the U.S.S.R, IWD, like May Day, later lost much of its radical content, first by reducing women to Stalinist realist portrayals of strong workers, then later by transforming the holiday into a Communist version of Mother’s Day, a day to offer women flowers. In the U.S., there was little celebration of IWD until the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s.

Origin Myths

A funny thing happened on the way to the sixties: a new past was written for IWD. As Internet surfers and scholars alike will discover in research on the holiday, it had somehow become the commemoration of glorious working-class struggle, a strike by American women in the textile industry in 1857. Many articles and websites even claim it was the first organized action by women in the world. Of course even restricting ourselves to U.S. history, this assertion is absurd: from the rebellions of slaves and indentured servants in early America, to the textile workers’ strikes of the 1820s and 1830s, women’s labor activism has always accompanied women’s labor. But far stranger is that no evidence has been found of any such strike. French feminist scholars, Françoise Picq and Liliane Kandel, who point out that 1857 was the year of Zetkin’s birth, find that the first trace of the 1857 date suddenly appear in the columns of the French Communist newspaper in 1955. There are several hypotheses about the reasons for the creation of this origin myth, but most convincing seems that is allowed the Communist Party to weed out the connections to the feminist or suffrage movements of the early 20th century and morph IWD into a pure worker’s holiday. As Picq and Kandel, joined by US historian Temma Kaplan and Québécoise Rénée Coté, debunked 1857 myth, yet another cropped up, that of a massive 1908 demonstration of working women, generally a misdating of various other strikes and protests, none of which were in March 1908. Decidedly, resistance to the notion of any feminist-socialist convergence continues to this day.

IWD and the WLM

The Women’s Liberation Movement rediscovered IWD and claimed it as its own. The first record I have found of contemporary celebrations was in 1968 when Chicago Women’s Liberation held a festive public event with a showing of the long-blacklisted film The Salt of the Earth, a fitting film in which wives of striking Latino miners impose personal and political recognition, combining issues of gender, class and race. That this celebration starts in Chicago is also fitting, bringing us full circle back to the city of May
Day, the holiday that inspired IWD. Chicago became a center for Socialist feminism in the 1970s and their choice of a film, one combining labor and feminism, was a taste of their future movement. That same year, 1968, in a film review for the University of California at Berkeley’s *Daily Californian*, Laura Rand Orthwein (later known as Laura X) called for a revival of International Women’s Day in the US.

It was in the streets of Berkeley, the following year, that the first US IWD demonstration took place. Laura X already a socialist and a feminist came across a mention of the 1917 Petrograd women’s demonstrations and the 1908 US Socialist rallies for suffrage. She became furious that this history had been hidden from her, particularly the link between socialism and feminism. In the Left, she remembered, women had been ridiculed and called bourgeois when they called for “the right to be human.” And the Left, she said, perpetrated the myth that nobody in the working class had ever fought for women’s rights, including the right to vote.¹⁰

Shortly thereafter, Laura attended a party where sociologist Pauline Bart spoke about the new class she was preparing, a “women’s studies” class. A much-loved, Left-Wing male professor retorted that Bart would never find enough material about women to fill a quarter. Laura remembers that this betrayal “knocked me into the orbit of the pure fury.” In three days she “pestered friends everywhere and pulled together a list of 1,000 women in world history: politics, the arts and sciences.” She nailed it to the male professor’s door “alla Martin Luther,” as she put it. She later reproduced this list, “Herstory Synopsis,” and despite the limited communications means available at the time, sold more than 10,000 of them.

Next, she and a tiny band of feminists, dressed up as historical figures, held the first IWD demonstration in the contemporary feminist movement. The radical press picked it up and by the next year, she says, there were some 30 protests around the country. Simultaneously, she began receiving feminist literature and documents from around the world that fed into her new International Women’s Liberation Archives, which later assembled about a million documents. Subsequently, inspired by Black History Month, she and the women working on the archives contributed to the campaign for the creation of women’s history week and then month.

These observances went mainstream, with women’s history month and International Women’s Day and Year being endorsed by US President Jimmy Carter and the United Nations. IWD has become not only a day of protest, but also a part of State Feminism, and the day when nations around the world announce new policies and actions in favor of women.

**Mother’s Day**

Like IWD, the US Mother’s Day was born about a century ago, A woman by the name of Anna Jarvis devoted years of her life to the idea, tirelessly lobbying for it from 1908 to honor her own mother, who had worked for a regional mother’s day to reconcile the nation through mothers from both sides of the Civil War conflict.

Others had supported a mother’s day before that, notably abolitionist and suffragist Julia Ward Howe, author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” who penned a call in 1872 for mothers around the world to stop their sons from injuring each other. In recent years, feminists have rediscovered this document and flooded the Internet with it. Yet
today’s holiday does not come from Howe’s call. It was Jarvis’s work that lead to President Woodrow Wilson’s 1914 establishment of the official May holiday.

Once victorious, Anna Jarvis became utterly disgusted by the commercialization of mother’s day, actually going to the extent of protesting and getting arrested. She was stigmatized by the press, particularly as she remained single and never had children. Her portrayal as a “bitter childless old maid,” so vividly demonstrates the pitfalls of glorifying women as mothers. Reducing women to their maternal (or any so-called natural) function, this story shows, is an inherently antifeminist stance.

French Mothers Day is even a more flagrant example of this danger of glorifying motherhood. Under the collaborationist Vichy regime, Mothers Day was born as a part of the fascist repertoire. If you were lucky enough not to be Jewish, Romani, lesbian, or “childless,” you could be honored, as a mother producing children for the nation. Petain proclaimed “la fête des mères” on May 25, 1941.11 Simultaneously, the Vichy regime banned divorce in the first three years of marriage; made abortion a crime against the State--ie treason, punishable by death; and increased punishment for adultery and for abandoning children. Mothers, certain mothers, were venerated as vessels to produce babies, of the right “race,” of course, for France as for the German Reich.

Not only because of specific history, but because of its demonstration of the danger of glorifying motherhood, while demonizing reproductive freedom, French feminists entirely reject Mothers Day, while still celebrating IWD.

Although no holiday has a timeless, unchanging story, the comparison of International Women’s Day and Mothers Day does suggest that the latter, by reducing women to a supposedly natural role, is easily turned against the interest of women as a group. To the contrary, International Women’s Day, a product and on-going part of social movement struggles, by joining together women’s status and needs as workers and political subjects, has often contributed to women’s emancipation.
In academe, of course, sociologists and anthropologists study rituals including ways in which they reinforce adherence to a nation or cohesion of a subset of the population.

The accusation of “bourgeoise” leveled against feminists goes back to this era. See Françoise Picq, "Bourgeois Feminism' in France: A Theory Developed by Socialist Women before World War I," trans. Irene Tilton, in Judith Friedlander, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, eds., Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 330–343. Rarely have radicals discounted as bourgeois the ideas and practices of male figures, say, for instance Marx or Martin Luther King.

Women's magazine of the German Social Democratic Party, WASM

An interesting twist came when I first arrived in Ohio as a visiting professor: Steve Austria, a right-wing candidate from my district to the House of Representative published a jingoistic history of Labor Day as a part of his campaign. Alerted by a journalist, I discovered that this piece was extensively plagiarized and I denounced this in the local press. He was elected, and continued to manipulate history to his ends: when President Barack Obama spoke of a “New New Deal,” Austria opposed it on the grounds that the last New Deal caused the Great Depression (the New Deal of course was introduced as a response to the Depression and thus postdates it).


Kandel and Picq, PAGE.


The “Old” Left, although relatively attentive to the “woman question,” subordinated it to the “primary contradiction” of class.

Irrespective of the origins… motherhood, essentialist qualities be they individual mothering or collective social feminism or the idea of women as innately pacifist… or later as innately patriotic

This is the same Wilson who adopted a Gold Star for mothers and wives of the soldiers who died in World I, trying to transform

Later that year, Wilson was confronted by women pacifists protested